

What do startup founders want?

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To oversimplify greatly for a second:

People in New York want money. People in Los Angeles want fame. People in DC want power. People in Miami want to have fun. But what do people in San Francisco want?

It's not money. Sure, a startup that sells for a lot of money is nice, but it's clearly not the goal. I think few startup founders would feel good about building something worthless and then tricking a big company into buying it for a lot of money.

It's not fame. Sure, Mark Zuckerberg is famous now, but he actually seems more annoyed about that than anything.

It's not power, or else the founders of GitHub would look ridiculous for giving all their power away to their employees. Paul Buchheit didn't write Gmail because he wanted to control the actions of its users.

It's certainly not having fun. (Although, like most hard things, startups are actually surprisingly fun.)

No, I think the thing startup founders want is *importance*.

Importance is a bit like power, but heavily diluted. Power is about being able to make people do something they wouldn't otherwise do. The Instagram founders weren't in it for power: they have very little interest in making people take photos they wouldn't otherwise take. But nonetheless, their decisions had a great deal of importance for their users. If they decided to put ads in their app or remove a favorite filter, millions of people's lives suddenly get a little bit more annoying.

Because your tiny decisions have huge impacts on people, when you're important everyone wants to hear what you have to say. You can go to TED and WEF and the audience wants to come up to talk to you, not so much because they want something from you, but because what you think has a big impact on their lives.

This is why selling a startup is so hard. It gets you money and fame but it means losing a lot of your importance. Now when you go to TED, you're a has-been; you just answer questions about what the good old days are like.

Importance is different from impact. Tim Berners-Lee (inventor of the Web) had a huge impact in the world, but he's not particularly important. He decided long ago that the Semantic Web was the next big thing, but few people cared, because practically there was very little he could actually do about it.

Dick Costolo (CEO of Twitter), by contrast, is pretty important. If he decides that Twitter needs a "consistent user experience", he can shut down apps millions of people use each day, destroying the companies that build them.

We all know the dangers of wanting money or power. But the dangers of wanting importance are little-discussed. Importance tends to require centralizing things, which means restraining innovation and leaving yourself open to the demands of actual power.

Imagine Tim had built the Web the same way folks built Twitter. All our web pages would be hosted by a single company, accessed through an API that they defined and could change at whim. Web applications would be far weaker than they are today (since it would be hard to store anything interesting on TimCo's servers) and powerful corporations would constantly be knocking people offline permanently for various terms-of-service violations (no trademark infringement! no hate speech!).

Tim would be much more important in this world, but I don't think the rest of us would be better off.

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